

## MATERIALS

### On Propagating Collective Resilience in Times of War: A Conversation with Cassils

Eliza Steinbock

In the early Amsterdam evening and the Los Angeles morning of Friday October 27, 2017 I had the following conversation with trans visual artist Cassils, each of us installed behind laptop computers at our respective homes.<sup>1</sup> Looking into the Skype window, I recognized Cassils' front porch from the recent [VICE video documentary](#) about the complicated installation procedure of their minimalist clear cube sculpture "PISSSED," containing 200 gallons of their urine collected over 200 days since the current US President rescinded Obama-era protections for transgender people to use the toilet facilities of their choice.<sup>2</sup> Cassils' preserved urine was stored in refrigerators across Los Angeles in one-gallon jugs, then transferred into biohazard drums and shipped across the country to New York City to be put on display to protest the cruel material consequences of this ruling for all gender variant people.

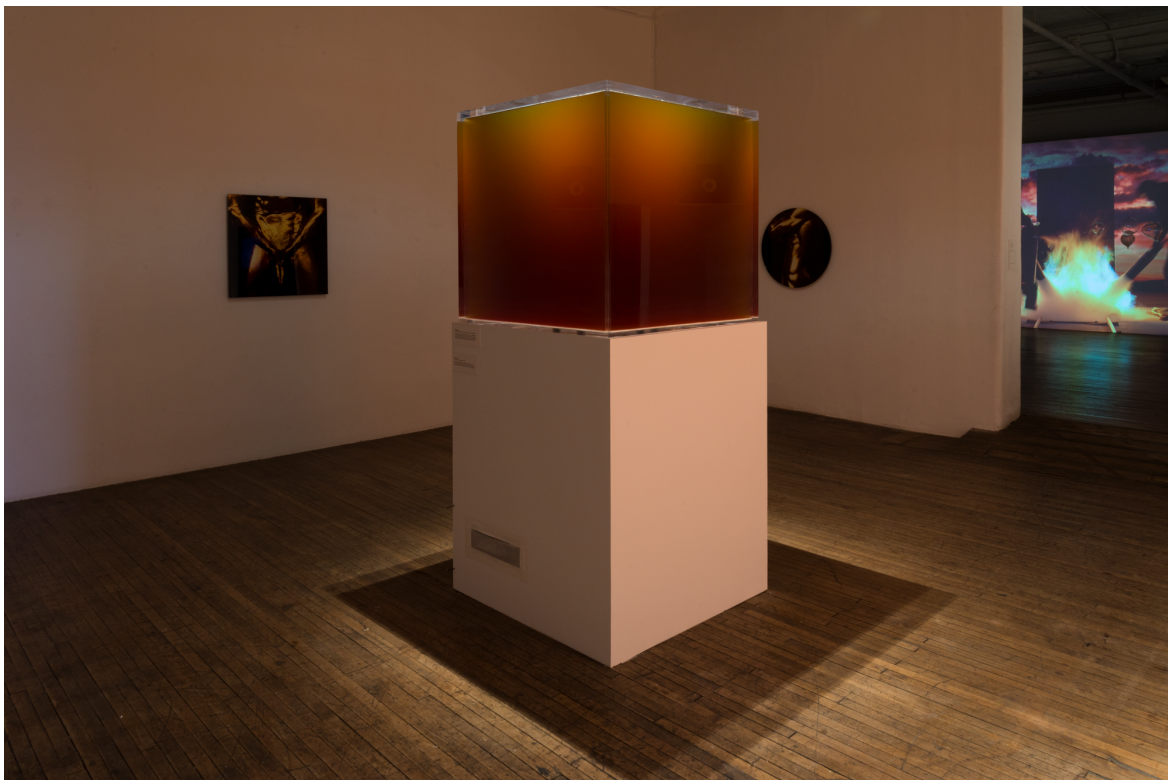
Supported by funds from their recent Creative Capital and Guggenheim fellow grants, Cassils' "PISSSED" is at the centre of a series of archly political performances that become visual works, each of which tackles a dimension of the violences LGBTI people currently face. Together they comprise the elaborate solo exhibition entitled [Monumental](#) at the [Ronald Feldman Gallery](#) (which had an extended run from, September 16–December 9, 2017), where Cassils is a represented artist.<sup>3</sup> All the formal sculptures, photographs, and videos on display there derive from durational performances, each of which require specialized artistic, physical, and mental training. For instance, the bronzed sculpture "Resilience of the 20%" (2016) is a cast of the remnant bashed clay from a "Becoming an Image" performance, and was polished by the collective hands that pushed the 1300-pound bronze, mounted onto a plinth, around to five LGBTI sites of trauma and resilience in Omaha, Nebraska—as shown in the exhibited video of the action, "Monument Push" (2017). The performance of Cassils' stunt that involved being lit on fire for fourteen seconds (the length of a controlled, elongated exhale) is documented in the fourteen-minute extreme slow-motion loop of "Inextinguishable Fire" (2015), and is accompanied by amorphous blown-glass sculptural forms made by a single exhale. "Alchemized" (2017) is a new photographic series, created with Robin Black, which exalts the self-determined transgender body gilded with thick gold paint, abstracted into striking shapes by torqued poses, while the opening night performance "Fountain" (2017) draws attention to the medicalized trans body by transferring Cassils' live urination to the glowing aesthetic cube filled with the urine mix. These monuments of precious metals and bodily waste, of sound, flesh, and glass speak to the precarity of the commons, the vulnerability and strength of trans bodies, the crisis of political speech, and the ways in which formal exercises can become recast with political urgency.

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**Cassils** is a visual artist working in live performance, film, sound, sculpture, and photography. They received their bachelor's degree from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and a Masters degree in visual arts and integrated media from the California Institute of the Arts. Cassils has adjudicated exhibition selections at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and currently is a lecturer in the Art Department at Stanford University. **Eliza Steinbock** is assistant professor of Film and Literary Studies at Leiden University's Centre for the Arts in Society. Their book, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment and the Aesthetics of Change*, is forthcoming from Duke University Press. They are completing work on a manuscript comprising interviews with twelve contemporary trans visual artists and analyses of their art practices.



Cassils, *MONUMENTAL*, 2017. Installation view. Photo. Megan Paetzhold. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.



Cassils, *MONUMENTAL*, 2017. Installation view. Photo: Megan Paetzhold. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.





Cassils, *Fountain*, 2017. Performance still from Cassils's closing action of 200-day durational performance, *PISSED*. Photo: Vince Ruvolo. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

In our conversation, Cassils explained to me that since the *Monumental* show, and especially since the released VICE documentary, they began receiving jarring volumes of hate mail, particularly upsetting because people direct messaged them through their artist page on Facebook (i.e., the correspondence with “trolls” was live). Examples can be found on their artist [Facebook page](#) of the kinds of misogynistic, transphobic, and hurtful language used.<sup>4</sup> One ploy used by trolls was to first send a warm, friendly message saying thank you for producing this important work, and then once Cassils responds in kind, to then blast back with hateful comments. In the midst of this latest ramped-up culture war against transgender rights, intensified by anonymized social media trolling and doxxing, Cassils shared that they are “just trying to get my bearings” through working creatively and to be “as generous as I possibly can” towards everyone. In the following conversation, I am reminded again and again of this generosity as it translates into big-heartedness, to paying it forward to other artists, and into acts of homage towards previous artistic works that Cassils lifts up as touchstones for cultural activists today. A second affective stream in our conversation is a sense of vigilant awareness, developed perhaps as integral to being a long-time durational artist whose training for each performance series requires a sense of hyperawareness of one’s bodily comportment. But this keen attention is not only internal, anchored in their bodily capacities; Cassils’ artistic practice also involves tuning into the political landscape, taking the temperature of one’s queer community, and considering how their created images circulate and stick. They want to know what their audience might need, right now. Thus, in what follows, we also discuss a number of crises and the kinds of antidote performance/image combinations that Cassils creates, alongside the odd sensation of the surprising, unanticipated ripple effects from how the works move in the fast-paced media world.

*Your artistic series largely start by responding to different issues and artists. Could you describe in detail your practice of developing work in this way, as a practice of responding, and taking responsibility? What effect is wrought from your historical recontextualization of other artists into the contemporary moment?*

In being queer or trans, there aren't many moments to pass on intergenerational knowledge. Growing up in the pre-Internet era there weren't many queer or trans artists working openly that I could easily approach or learn about. So, I practiced self-schooling to find political messages and tactics that have worked for others. From them I take on these tactics and innovate and update them for our current, new socio-political climate. This results in retaining the ethos, or the platform, or the form, and changing the other components in order to extend this message as it relates to a trans body versus only a binary male/female dynamic. I am also interested in how the dialogue circulates differently online versus in published art journals. Since my early teens, and in the years I was with the performance collective Toxic Titties (2000-2009), I have been working with references, anchor points, and touchstones from other like-minded artists. My starting question is "How can we hold onto those life lessons?" In doing this kind of archival research, I find a source of comfort and inspiration. I think, "If you lived through that then I can live through this."

An example of this archival practice as a method in my work is when I created the *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2010) series for the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions' contribution to the "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980" initiative, which invited artists to engage in the lineage of performance in Southern California. I wanted to respond to the interventions of Eleanor Antin and Lynda Bengalis, who are feminist artists of influence. In different ways they both responded to the limitations of the glass ceiling for women's careers and especially art-making. In turn, my response to their work—I realize more clearly now—was to think about the limitations placed on trans, non-binary and gender-nonconforming artists, a precise gender knowledge that I didn't have at the time, but have gained in part through making this work.

*Recently you became an American citizen, in addition to being Canadian, and have spoken out that it was important for you in this time to be a "citizen artist." What is the responsibility of a citizen artist in particular? How do you perform this role? What kind of threats and opportunities do you see for artists (especially yourself) who engage with digital media as a platform, and means of communication?*

The term "citizen artist" refers to artists who have direct conversations around politics. It spoke to me post-election when I felt a sense of impotency. I wondered, since I work with images and metaphor, what can I do? I wanted to take these feelings of uselessness in the face of crushing real world problems, and rethink my own artistic practice. In a way, the hate mail I'm receiving in response to the *Monumental* show, and especially "PISSSED," means that the work is generative—it has an effect. It might feel bad [to receive live hateful messages], but at least the artwork is enabling a set of relationships and reactions to take place.





Cassils, *Pissed*, Station Museum, 2018. Photo: Alejandro Santiago. Image courtesy the artist and Station Museum.

At the risk of hyperbole, I feel I am going to war every day. I mentioned this to a friend who said that makes sense because we are in the midst of a culture war. This means that it is time for me to do my job. I feel entrusted with figuring out what justice and freedom look like by sharing my ideas, having the work facilitate generative dialogue. This sense of a raging culture war is more prevalent since “he who shall not be named” took the highest office of the land. Especially in Los Angeles you can live in a bubble, you can curate your own existence because of how transportation and commercial interactions are privatized. And, on the whole, it is a friendly city. However, this means that when your bubble is punctured—for instance, this has started to happen in the last year in my day-to-day working and social life—it feels especially violent. I think people have become emboldened by someone who not only symbolizes racism and misogyny, but who actively puts it into practice and is able to legitimize it through legal means.

Personally, I have felt more overt misogyny because despite not identifying as a woman, many people see my presence as a gender non-conforming person as an attack on so-called God-given gender norms. In my workspace at a gym I experience extreme negative behavior from white men. With friends of colour I’m witnessing deeply racist, xenophobic and transphobic remarks and behavior that are more frequent and more unabashed than ever before. I have had two different friends from North America call to talk with me about being gay-bashed. People are acting out in ways that I couldn’t imagine before. Of course, I might be naïve and others would say, it was always this bad. I mainly want to stress that in the context of being an artist I am keeping track of how my real world, in real time, is being altered. My work as a citizen artist is invested in extending art beyond the frame of the gallery. I believe it is essential to consider how the press, public relations,

and the Internet can be utilized as amplifying devices. For better or worse, putting myself out there as an explicitly trans and explicitly politically left artist has made me a target. Perhaps I was a bit naïve, but I did not expect it; I was not emotionally ready for the onslaught of extremely violent messages. It is alarming that this is happening to me, an educated, white Canadian who is being targeted, when others who are far more vulnerable likely are receiving far worse abuse. I'm not asking for pity; I'm offering this as an observation on the new horizon within today's iteration of the culture wars.

*When you were making the series Cuts you circulated the Homage image online. How did this decision for this kind of distribution come about, and what were the repercussions? Namely, how did this lead to you making "The Resilient 20%" series of collages in which hate speech is incorporated into a non-digital print version of the photograph? What is the importance of resilience for you, for your audiences? How do you try to cultivate it as an aesthetic practice, specifically in performance? Is there a difference for you between performing violence, namely the (re)enactment of violence against queer and trans people using your own body, and representing it?*

My series *Cuts*, a result of collaborating with photographer Robin Black, included circulating images of myself posed with semiotic citations for gay male leather culture. We wanted to circulate these images of myself as a trans masculine person in gay male magazines to question who passes as male and the policing of who is male and what is masculine. Interestingly, some websites removed the image when someone realized that my "pecs" might in fact be "tits." In this way, the performance of the image continues to query how desire might be seen as being "mislead" by a body, or tricked in some way. Our point is that a body is a body. Further, we intimate that desire, empowerment, and freedom work best when they can transcend the boundaries of a binary sex/gender system.

When the *Cuts* series went up on the *Huffington Post* Gay Voices site back in 2011, including a video showing my bodybuilding transformation to become "cut," I experienced extreme forms of transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny through the comments on the article.<sup>5</sup> First of all, the anonymity of the online comment form encourages trolling. But now that someone in the White House supports these ideologies and is committed to a daily rolling back of protections, this feels ten-fold worse. It now feels like my work is yelling into white noise...

Six years ago, yes, there was push back, but thousands of people needed to hear that queer and trans bodies exist, and my exaggerated physique being put to extreme tests was an empowering visualization. I wanted the sensations my work elicits to contribute to growth, and now it feels like just a means to survive. Now I feel my work needs to act as a balm to the deplorable intolerance that politics is applauding, or at least rewarding.





Cassils, *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*, 2011. C-print, 40 x 30 inches. Photo: Cassils with Robin Black. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Yes, with reference to the works titled “Resilience of the 20%,” I am interested in modifying negative affects. You ask about the practice of collaging on the print version of that digital image from *Cuts*, “Advertisement: Homage to Benglis” (2011), which substitutes my ripped masculine physique for her double-ended dildo in the famous December 1974 *Artforum* ad. Well, my works aren’t super clean, they are not only empowering. By collaging I am harming the image, using a razorblade to cut into it, slicing then burning the surface of the emulsion. I make these collages as a gut reaction to the online hateful commentary directed at me, my body, this image of my body. The collages were a way to write back, to slow down the pace of online communications that often are knee-jerk, flippant responses. The analogue processes of slicing, burning, and drawing put to the photograph allowed for my experience of the digital onslaught to become carefully rendered.



Cassils, *Disfigured Image: The Resilient 20%*, 2013. Photo paper, marker, gouache, razor etching, 17 x 11 inches. Photo collage: Cassils with Robin Black. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.



These collages take their title from the Amnesty International statistic that worldwide hate crimes against trans and gender non-conforming people had risen 20% in 2012. I wanted to inscribe the resilience it would take for those added 20% to survive our time. Also, I was reading Cynthia Carr's biography of David Wojnarowicz, *Fire in the Belly* (2012), and thinking about his powerful image of a mouth being sewn shut in reference to the AIDS crisis.<sup>6</sup> The touchstone element I took from Wojnarowicz was to consider, "What does it mean to perform the violence one feels on the image?"

I use liveness and real materials in order to bring our bodies back from the divorced reality of screens. I want to give an emotional sensation. I try to create jarring images that solicit moments of empathy that will work as recalibration tools. Resilience might be built up from the jarring moments when violence is shown, that is, when we *see* what that violence looks like when it shows up on a body. This is not about eliciting a shock, neither from the frightening image of the sewn mouth, nor from the burns into my body or slices across my throat. The image remains a jarring one because this is how my body is perceived before or after the alteration of the collage. It is jarring to the gender norms for a man or a woman.<sup>7</sup>

Rupture is prevalent in my live works, too. Working with liveness I am able to take over the bulk of a person's body by infiltrating their senses, much like music is able to do. Through sound, imagery, tone, and performative energy I have the ability to permeate the audience. I need to do this to break through our privatized experiences, the ways we are removed from each other's direct existences. Live performance brings people into contact. Before the election this was key to my desire to wake people up, but since then this is important because it creates a space for solidarity to form, to bring people together. My performance of the "Monument Push" in Omaha, Nebraska (April 20, 2017) involved the simple action of having people from within this one community participate in moving a heavy monument around to sites in order to commemorate unmarked and therefore invisible locations of pain and resilience, and to do it together.<sup>8</sup> In this group of over 100 people there were huge differences in life experience. At the sites selected by Amy Schindler, Director of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Omaha, Nebraska, a young queer man of colour talked about when he was incarcerated in the prison and placed in solitary for his "own safety," while an older white gay man shared memories of the first gay parade, when people wore paper bags over their heads for safety. In each context the lingering fear and shame attached to those sites could be transformed into empathy between people who enacted effortful means to reach that location in order to listen to each other. Moreover, from the shared solidarity enacted by pushing the monuments for each other my hope was that coalitions would form that lasted beyond the finite performance on the streets of Omaha. It raises further durational questions about the precise temporality of performance when not only one-time gestures, but also the sustaining of relationships, mark solidarity.

"Monument Push" was conceived and enacted before the major media moment erupted around the movement to tear down racist monuments and to reclaim queer spaces through monuments. It was right on the cusp of what is now a national, and more far-reaching global dialogue. I read just this morning that there was an action to throw red paint on the statue base of Teddy Roosevelt that is standing outside the American Museum of Natural History. (Roosevelt is on horseback, flanked by subservient Native peoples.<sup>9</sup>) These kinds of actions are jarring because they ask us to rethink history to see who has been left out or denigrated, to be critical about how communities memorialize, and consider what it means to make art in this time. For me, making art is a way to bring these coalitions together rather than just waving my own fist in the air. How can I use my position of privilege as an artist who gets a grant to make a work and pay it forward? In gathering

together people to make these participatory works I'm thinking strategically about giving the platform of art creation over to those groups who need an opportunity to gather, to come together.

*The creation of 103 Shots as a response video to the massacre of forty-nine persons and fifty-four critically wounded persons at the queer Florida nightclub called Pulse also came from a gathering. When the mass shooting at Pulse took place many of us experienced it as a highly mediated and yet immediate "breaking news" event. Did you want to capture a similar kind of "liveness" when you had Pride festival go-ers perform the balloon-squeezing crush? The work also echoes the social media grammar of "that feeling when" (TFW) memes that picture the reaction shot of someone as they experience something specific. How did you and the team come to decide on the cinematography? The sound of the Foley balloon popping on the soundtrack replays the confusion of what people were experiencing (a live shooter or a celebratory Pride party). Could you describe how people responded to the sounds on the set of the shoot, only a week after the Pulse massacre? 103 Shots was released on the HuffPo Queer Voices page. In what ways does this videos' circulation into other (digital) publics build resilience, do you think?*

Interesting that you connect this gathering to other performance gatherings; I hadn't realized that thread through these works before. Yes, we made *103 Shots* (2016) in the Mission's Dolores Park in San Francisco, the epicenter for the free, community-based Pride celebrations. We used a white backdrop and first wanted to film it with an extreme close-up and slowly zoom out from the abstracted composition of the bodies pressed tightly together to bring attention to the lens of information being given to you. I was interested in how the power of telling the truth is controlled through the framing of an image (similar to how we shot the video of *Inextinguishable Fire* in a studio as a slow zoom-out that reveals its own production context). First, you'd see the balloon and bodies, then the white backdrop, then the park setting, and the crowds of people, and the police at the perimeter. But it was too windy and the scrim was tearing, and moreover, some people interpreted the sound of the balloon popping as a gunshot because they did not see what was actually happening behind the backdrop (a balloon pressed to bursting between bodies). Out of respect we shut down the shoot after 2.5 hours because it was re-inscribing the trauma of the Pulse shooting, in which survivors recalled their confusion of the gunshots with champagne corks popping, balloons bursting, or fireworks. The act of generating the work was to create a moment where mass participation of strangers coming together might create a moment of familial bonding.





Cassils, Still from *103 Shots*, 2016. Single channel video with sound. Runtime 2:35 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York



Cassils, Still from *103 Shots*, 2016. Single channel video with sound. Runtime 2:35 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

For those who participated in the video,<sup>10</sup> the reenactment of this confusion (at Pulse) was taken on as a playful exercise rather than a sad or bad experience. They treated it more as a game, of how to

contort their bodies to press together the balloon and make it pop, resulting in some very intimate embraces, kissing and surprised faces that register the sting of the latex balloon's skin as it ruptures. I should also add that people were really up for it, and excited to see an artist from their community engaging with the topic. In this way, I felt encouraged that I was making art for my people, which is another definition of performing as a citizen artist. This desire to create engaging art for the people, and particularly "my queer people," has a long history: when I was in art school and the stuff I made wasn't fully understood by my peers there, I'd be encouraged by non-art educated queer folks who felt I was on the right track. I want to make work that has multiple entry points. It should be accessible and real for someone with and without formal training for art.

The urgency of making this response to Pulse was also personal. I was on the Lucas Artist Residency over June 12–13, at the time tucked away into an isolated retreat near San Jose with my wife Cristy Michel, so we were away from our friends in Los Angeles during Pride weekend.<sup>11</sup> It turned out that this residency required its participants to dine with the rich benefactors, and the night after Pulse we were seated with a woman who made it very clear she made the same amount of money in one day that I might hope to make in a year. In this context of the unfolding events of Pulse, including extremely violent anti-Muslim rhetoric because the shooter wanted to be seen as acting on behalf of ISIS, this woman also dismissed our pain and sadness about Pulse. She said it would be a mere blip on the social media radar. We knew that the tragedy of Pulse was foremost for the people of colour in Florida whose community was targeted, yet out of empathy for those who are marginalized, Cristy and I were outraged. At this point neither of our families had called to ask how we were either. This compounded our sense of isolation, and my response was to try to connect to my community through art. I also wanted to make a response to the fast-paced mediated rhetoric of violence, to cut through the waves of mass shooting news reports that make it hard to keep track of any one act of violence. Now that it is more than one year later, it does feel dated to think of Pulse, but that does not make it any less relevant to want to remember, or to try to create a work that would expand our capacity for empathy. And, personally, I wanted to surround myself with the blanket of my community, and offer that blanket for us all to gather under.

*103 Shots* was created then with the impetus to puncture the homonationalist media attention on Trump's fake support for gay and transgender Americans by using them as props to fight terrorists (marked as foreign, brown, black, or non-Christian). I knew that I had to make it fast in order to distribute it on social media by the Monday after Pride. I decided to work with my long-time collaborator from the Toxic Titties performance group, Dr. Julia Steinmetz. She agreed to write the contextualizing essay about the response video, and place it into the socio-political sphere of xenophobia and queerphobia. I would make a response through image-making and address the visual, visceral, and sonic elements of the event. With my team, we produced the images and sound in a weekend by working 14–16 hours a day for three days, driven by a sense of urgency. Together we made a combined front in order to create a space for dialogue around the Pulse tragedy, and even for experiencing joy within the unfolding tragedy of ongoing xenophobic and queerphobic violence. The rich woman was right in that the speed of the constant unfurling of horrific events creates a strata of trauma, each burying the other. This may produce a kind of scar tissue on our bodies, in that we lose our sensibility, but I refused to believe that no one would remember the Pulse victims within a few weeks. I kept thinking of that saying, "They are coming for you in the morning, and for me at night."

Although it is sometimes a conundrum to be boxed into only being a trans community member, and I wish I could more often discuss the formal aspects of my work with interviewers, the First Nations

artist James Luna, whom I recently saw give a docent tour of Jimmie Durham's exhibition at the Hammer, reminded me of this unique responsibility. He said someone from his community once said to him, you might feel like you are boxed in, but to us you are on a pedestal, in a position to speak for us. Though I do find it frustrating to only have my work read in relation to identity politics, if ever there was a time to claim this mantel and speak out, the time is now.

I never speak alone though; these works are always inspired and formally guided by the art histories of those hard-fought social movements and freedoms that find new contexts in my work. For example, in *103 Shots* I borrow the exact font from Queer Nation's graphics that were used in the 1980s and early 1990s. With this design choice I want to pay their work forward to a younger generation who can also feel inspired by Gran Fury's tactics of issuing subversive "public service announcements" (PSAs), like in "Kissing Doesn't Kill."<sup>12</sup> I also used black-and-white in the video for the same reason, to echo their formal choices. The video was meant to circulate online, for free, and to engender discussion, but it has also been shown on a huge screen at a Creative Capital event. I was overwhelmed by the video's cinematic capacity being tapped in this way. It also seemed to work—most people were crying by the end of the three minutes. I was glad to see that it worked equally well whether via the delivery system of the computer to nodes of linked individuals, or a cinema theatre screen around which we are all gathered. The point for me in either case was that *103 Shots* would complicate the discourse at the time about safety, precarity and show a means of finding your joy in the midst of trauma. I wanted to pay homage to that heady mix by inverting the sounds of celebration that were confused with the sounds of death. In fact, in all the images I make, I want to try to hold together the struggle of both sides: the endless inversion of celebration into violence, and empowerment into harsh realities.

This is also the case with *Becoming an Image* (2012–present), wherein I'm punching and kicking 250 pounds of animation clay until I "gas out," which runs around twenty-minutes of full-out fighting time. Clay has the unique property of pushing back exactly what is pressed into it. So, as I punch into it, it also forms me just as much. This represents—no, actually literalizes—the constant inversion of empowerment and violence. Or, in *Inextinguishable Fire*, I wanted to invoke the absolute terror of being lit on fire, but I do so in a controlled and consensual act that is not clearly indicated at all times. I play on the known and unknown about this act of immolation. Is it a final act of someone who is at their wit's end and this is the last form of protest? This quandary about agency is what I wanted to enact in real life. Being burned alive is also associated with witch burnings and the KKK, but also with Vietnamese monks protesting the war. My question is, "How can we make acts of violence generative?" Yet I am also cognizant that what I create is a representation. Like Harun Farocki's film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), in which he puts out a cigarette on his arm to index the burning of napalm on the body, I can only show the gross violence at the remove of a representational index.



Cassils, *Resilience of the 20%*, 2016. Bronze cast of clay from a *Becoming an Image* performance. Bronze Sculpture: 1,300 lb. Steel Plinths: 900 lb. Photo: Vince Ruvolo Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.



But these works I discuss have connected to gross acts of violence unexpectedly, which open them up to new readings. I performed *Becoming an Image* in Zagreb, Croatia and the audience's experience was filtered through the living memory of the Yugoslavian genocide, which invokes a very different history than when it was first performed in an empty basement room of the ONE archives of LGBTI culture (in California) to signify the lack of historical transgender representation.

*Inextinguishable Fire* was performed live in London at the British National Theatre, and the video projection ran continuously outside on its wall, which could be seen for free by any passer-by walking there along the Thames. After the Paris attacks they decided to pull the public screening because, according to the producers, my act of being lit on fire no longer seemed respectful to those who lost their lives in the bombing.



Cassils, *Inextinguishable Fire*, Station Museum, 2018. Photo: Alejandro Santiago. Image courtesy the artist and Station Museum

*In your work you balance showing the celebration of transqueer love and life, while also attending to the unrelenting threats against it. Since Pulse, how have you continued to work with resilience and responsibility, as themes, concepts, or practices? With regard to responding and being resilient/enacting resilience, are there limits to what we can respond to, in order to persist? What is your assessment of the current climate towards trans/non-binary persons? In your collaborative work, do you see other horizons and presents that we should and could build towards? What sustains you, feeds your resilience?*

I recount these different contexts [above] because the work should not be limited to being about this or that, nor can it be read in a right or a wrong way. As a citizen artist I still identify more as Canadian, but now that I'm a legal US citizen I have the ability to speak out about the country in which I live. I am legal, and that gives me more rights for my expression, or at least the freedom to

exercise these rights. At this moment I have tried to move my work towards the centre of the country, and focus less on the coastal cities, because I think it is more generative to be where queer and trans lives are under constant attack and yet where they have less resources and infrastructure to respond to these attacks.

With “PISSSED” I learned a lot, for instance how urine is weaponized by the state when it considers trans people’s pee to be a potential criminal offense. But also, in shipping urine, I had to take precautions because it was considered a biohazard. I am trained as a painter and retain this love of materials. I was trying so hard to figure out how to sustain the material of urine, but it is ephemeral in its form. Already it is darkening in the cube as the proteins unravel and bacteria growth clouds the liquid. As a performer I know you can’t ever catch a live performance entirely either. I’m teasing out this red thread through both performance and seemingly materially solid artworks, of how a complete capture of its experience, or fixing it for eternity, is impossible. (I play on this impossibility with the breaths encapsulated in glass, included in the *Monument* show.) The cube of urine is contextualized by audio recordings from the Virginia School Board hearings of the young transgender man Gavin Grimm’s plea to use the toilet of his choice at his high school and the ensuing proceedings of the Fourth Court of Appeals. These voices on the soundtrack articulate the ignorance and biases that run through every level of judicial proceedings about trans bodies and the right to public facilities. In support of Gavin Grimm and all the others his case represents, my response is to ask, “Whose lives are deemed worthy and whose do you flush?”



Cassils, *Pissed*, Station Museum, 2018. Photo: Alejandro Santiago. Image courtesy the artist and Station Museum.

For an upcoming event as part of a City of Los Angeles Grant at the Barnsdall Art Park and Museum I'll have an opportunity to show a work in a public park. It opens in April 2018 exactly 400 days after the president took office. I'm thinking about filling a tank with 400+ gallons of urine, one gallon for every day that passes since the Obama executive order was rescinded on February 27, 2017, and hosting a drive for people to donate their urine to this statement piece. Collectively we'd speak about how the oppression of one person whose ability to urinate in public facilities is policed thus limits their ability to participate in public life, but we'd do it together.

I'd also say that I practice resilience in being scrappy. For example, it is expensive to ship monuments, but I'm not going to let resources and practicalities limit my ability to make creative work. There is a joy in hacking the system; thinking of ways I can manage to get around seemingly set limitations excites me. I also consider resilience as a personal trainer and bring the knowledge of how to not overextend oneself. I work with the training concept of periodization in which over 4–6 weeks the body adapts to one kind of training, and then needs to change. During that time, you can rest the body in certain ways, and encourage growth in other ways (speed, force, etc.). I'm also reading about how Kathy Acker would write intensively for six months a year, and then would take an entire six months off.<sup>13</sup> I'd love to do that too!

This isn't just about a flat understanding of self-care being important, it is about recognizing the finitude of what one can do, and making space for joy. I stretch myself to think about what I can do to give back, to diligently allow space for regeneration. Thus, self-care is a strategy that we must take into mind. If this is a marathon, not a sprint, how do we train for that?

### **Coda: Through the Darkness, Together**

Since this interview, over February 22–23, 2018, I had the chance to visit in person with Cassils in Los Angeles and discuss their plans for the City of Los Angeles (COLA) Artist Fellowship Grant at the Barnsdall Art Park and Museum exhibition. The show was ultimately titled, “Aline’s Orchard (Between Scandal and Oblivion),” opening April 29 and running until June 24, 2018. This specific land site in Silver Lake belonged to the never-married oil heiress, Aline Barnsdall, who was interested in feminism, radical causes, and progressive theatre. Surrounding her Frank Lloyd Wright home, the Hollyhock House on “Olive Hill” (now the art museum and park), she planted an extensive olive tree grove that was later frequented by queers cruising for sex. The olive grove has since been thinned to deter people from using the public land for a sexual community meeting space. This act of homophobic “cleaning up” that also increases surveillance of sexual activity finds echoes in the recent US “Fight Online Sexual Trafficking Act” (FOSTA). As Cassils’ publicity statement says, this bill is predicated on protecting women and girls, but is written so broadly that it effectively targets the use of online sites by sex workers who can more safely screen clients, and in general any website that might be used for dating. Responding to this erotophobic and whorephobic bill that went into effect on April 11, 2018, “Aline’s Orchard” recreates the sound, smell, and sensory feel of cruising in the dark amongst olive trees in order to engender opportunities in public for sexual expression amongst consenting adults. Hence, the visitor who joins others in the dark experiences firsthand the dynamics of group formation, and the potential for art to become the platform for erotic and political alliances and connections—however lasting. It was successful in that an orgy in a civic art gallery was self-documented by visitors, taking place on a Sunday afternoon no less. This latest Cassils exhibition also recalls the history of the Mattachine Society, the earliest LGBT rights group in the US, founded by the communist Harry Hay in 1950 on steps leading up an



epic hill nearby. Holding open this once and possible future, via a wander in the dark, together, “Aline’s Orchard” reminds visitors that struggles for empowerment are always bound into challenging systemic violence and surveillance. The generative actions of Cassils’s current series of projects lie foremost in art experiences that are given over to the needs, desires, and agenda of the moment, dragging forward in time the dark power of the creatively generative past to foster resilience in the now.



Self-documentation image of Outdoor Sex during *Aline’s Orchard* exhibition. Screenshot from participant, courtesy of Cassils.





Self-documentation text of *Outdoor Sex* during *Aline's Orchard* exhibition. Screenshot from participant, courtesy of Cassils.

## Notes

1. This conversation has been edited for clarity. The “About” page on Cassils’ website (<http://cassils.net/about-2/>) provides the following information about their trans identity: “Cassils is a gender non-conforming trans masculine visual artist. Cassils uses plural gender-neutral pronouns (they, them, their) and a single name (as opposed to first and surname) and asks that journalists do likewise when referring to them. This singularity of name and plurality of gender reflects through language the position Cassils occupies as an artist. For guidelines on writing about gender non-conforming people, please reference the GLAAD Media Reference Guide on Transgender Issues: <http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>.”
2. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-TI7GoJ2iw&t=11s>.
3. See <http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/exhsolo/exhcas17.html>.
4. See <https://www.facebook.com/cassilsartist/>.
5. See [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-traditional-sculpture\\_b\\_983384.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-traditional-sculpture_b_983384.html).
6. See Cynthia Carr’s *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (2012).
7. See my article (2014) on how Cassils’ performances foreground the trans spasm streaking across a transphobic nervous system.
8. See <https://vimeo.com/234074713>.
9. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/arts/protesters-deface-roosevelt-statue-outside-natural-history-museum.html>.
10. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpEyQVKif\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpEyQVKif_k).
11. See <http://montalvoarts.org/programs/residency/>.
12. See <http://creativetime.org/projects/kissing-doesnt-kill-greed-and-indifference-do/>.
13. See Chris Kraus’ *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography* (2017).

## References

- Carr, Cynthia. 2012. *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*. New York: Bloomsbury.
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